

REFLECTIONS

July 23, 2017

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Lois Spreen

Matthew 13:31-33

As I looked over the various scripture readings for this Sunday, the parable of the mustard seed stood out for me. It is found in Matthew 13:31-32 and goes like this:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

When I think of this scripture I also think of another reference to a mustard seed in the New Testament. It is found in Matthew 17:20, **“For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’, and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.”**

I like these two verses together because one deals with personal faith and the other deals with personal actions that bring God’s reign of love (or kingdom of heaven) on earth. To me, they are two sides of the same coin. A small seed of faith grows exponentially and is capable of achieving great things and small seeds of action bring about a kingdom of love.

The first thing that strikes me is how weird this parable is relative to the world we live in and I grew up in. When has small and understated ever been rewarded in our culture or even desired? It is not the way we are taught to make things happen. Being smart, strong, rich, powerful, and beautiful is what makes mountains move.

I grew up in a wealthy suburb of New York City where parents were doctors, lawyers and successful business people. In my high school and among my peers, striving, reaching for success and comparisons were a daily fact of life. We were competing with each other at some level: vying to get into top schools, getting good grades, securing high academic rank, being popular, achieving success in sports or extra-curricular activities. All ways to stand out. Those who were smart, athletic, talented or beautiful were the ones who seemed to get the attention, to get ahead, to be seen as winners and destined for success.

What could the parable of the tiny mustard seed offer?

Later, working in a large corporation, the reality was similar. Again, lots of competition to determine who was better or best. Who was working the hardest, creating the most innovative programs, being the most effective influencer, or making the best presentations? These were the actions that got you to the top; to “win” that next assignment or next promotion.

Again, what could the parable of the tiny mustard seed offer?

And, as I perceive and take in the images and messages that come at me every day in the media, I see that the movers and shakers in our world are still the athletic, beautiful powerful, rich or talented. Ours is a culture of “big, mighty, and exceptional”. Who thinks that anything significant would come from a mustard seed? How awful in our culture to be seen as small, tiny and seemingly insignificant? Who wants to be labeled as average? Power, money, influence, exceptional talent—these are what makes things happen.

So what can the parable of the tiny mustard seed offer us?

The scripture has a way of turning conventional thinking on its head. In the American culture where power, wealth, and winning are so important, the parable of the mustard seed is nothing short of counter-cultural or even revolutionary. It challenges us to look at our world through a different lens.

God’s kingdom seems to run by a distinctive and unique set of “laws”. The economics are very different than what we see and experience day-to-day. In scripture, the weak become strong, the lame walk, and the blind see. A tiny mustard seed grows into faith that moves mountains. A tiny mustard seed is capable of transforming our world.

What we see is that the kingdom of God is not a kingdom of power and might, but a reign of love. The kingdom of God (kingdom of love) comes into being by spreading from person to person and not by force. It is a quiet revolution: at first silent and imperceptible (like the mustard seed planted in the earth), but ultimately dynamic and transformative. Love is not linear, it grows exponentially.

The parable of the mustard seed challenges us to rethink what is possible. Even the tiniest of faith or positive action can have impact disproportionate to the “investment”. That’s really pretty mind blowing. As I look around, I see so many needs in our world. The needs are so great, I often wonder if it is worth even trying to make a dent. You look to the left and right and see individuals who are dynamic, well educated, gorgeous, rich, and the list goes on. Why should I (or we) “plant our little mustard seed” when there are others around us who are going to be better at it—whatever “it” is—than we are?

But God doesn’t care about my credentials. It is not a matter of how hard I work or how good we are. We are enough! Instead, we are merely asked to respond to the invitation—the invitation to plant our mustard seed. To offer who we are, where we are. We are not asked to worry about whether our efforts will be successful, noticed or honored. God is the soil that makes those seeds grow and God has promised that even the smallest amount of faith or faithful action will bring things into our life, our community, and the world beyond our expectations. Like the ripples made by a small stone thrown into the water, our faith and actions send waves into the world around us.

The parable of the mustard seed takes us where we are and invites us to step out in faith (even if it is almost imperceptible) and in action (even if viewed by others as insignificant) because the outcome of planting these small seeds is big. And the cool thing about the parable of the mustard seed is not only does the seed grow into a big

tree, but it is a place that birds come to nest. In essence, the seeds transform into a place of rest, refuge and community. Wow!

This is also a great parable for SPC during this time of transition. We are anxious about many things: who will be our interim pastor, who will be the called pastor, how each ministry will continue, how we will stay together and move forward. We want to know how it is all going to work out.

The parable of the mustard seed offers both reassurance and promise. Reassurance that we are enough and that even the tiniest demonstration of faith or faithful action will have an impact. We each are invited to take our own “baby steps of faith”: a gentle touch, a note of sympathy, a word of encouragement, standing up for those who cannot, helping someone in need, offering our time, talent or treasure. These are just some of the mustard seeds we are invited to plant.

The promise is that together our steps of faith and action will ripple out into our faith community and beyond. The promise is that our mustard seeds will grow our faith community in ways we can't even imagine; now, during this time of uncertainty, and into the future. The promise is that the seeds will grow into what God intends: something wonderful, mysterious and transformative.

• **

Christa Joyce
Romans 8:38-39

*I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. **Romans 8:38-39***

Twenty or so years ago, I was very much not convinced of this at all. I look at my spiritual journey as one in which I walked as far away from myself and the love of God as I could manage. Without consciously knowing it, I was exerting great effort to separate myself from myself, and in doing so, from God. It is very difficult indeed to speak about the ways I mistreated myself, about the ways I despised my own body, injured it, self-medicated my feelings, made choices propelled by fear and self-loathing. Recalling this version of me brings up many difficult memories that left me feeling deeply separate.

There are plenty of reasons I've come up with through the years for why I spent such a great chunk of my life in the throes of self-destruction. I grew up Catholic and somehow the way I grew up Catholic conveyed in me a great disgust for my body. When I began developing as a young pre-teen, I saw both my budding body and my curious sexual urges as a source of sin that I needed to pray away—or better yet, starve away. Bullied as a middle and young high schooler for how I look only further spoke to me of the ways my body and face were sources of failure. I can remember lying in bed around the age of 13, staring at myself from head to toe and listing each awful physical trait God had cursed me with.

After my father died, I spent the remainder of high school and all of my college years—both undergrad and graduate years—vacillating between trying to contain and control life and trying to tune life out entirely. And so many memories after 16 are filled with hurt, enmeshed in alcohol and eating disorders—self destructive behavior on top of self-destructive behavior of a scared girl, trying so hard to control everything, yet moving further and further into a state of separation.

I think, though, that God only lets us remain separated for a while, and if we're open and listen closely, eventually something or someone will arrive that will show us the way back to connection to this great love. At least this was how it went for me, and it began when I found my way on to a yoga mat. The word yoga means "union." This is a state of being connected, of being deeply convinced of connection, between the small self that is the individual human body and the larger Self, that is the great I AM, the love of God. I didn't know at first that this is why I was doing yoga—I thought it was for the toned abs that I saw on model Christy Turlington in pictures of her doing yoga. Slowly, though, I realized that the deeper work of this practice is walking me back home to my body. Though I had cursed it and condemned and abused it, this body continues to amaze me as a miraculous home in which the spirit of God and God's love lives abundantly. From the first class I took, I felt deeply that I had found space within myself finally to EXHALE. Lying down in the end resting pose of savasana, I could feel that I was laying down a lifetime of hurt and grief and that there waiting for me, was a space of reconnection, a space of coming home. For me, I had to come back home to my body before I could come home to the love of God.

Almost ten years, then, after the journey I began back to my body, I was urged by some dear yoga students, members of SPC, to attend a peace fest here. I knew from that first night, listening to a raucous band sing, "Give Peace a Chance" that I had found a home in which my spirit would be nurtured. I heard Randy say time and again, that God loves me as I am, and that the way of God is a way of living in love, and for the first time I was awake enough to really know these words in the core of my being, and to feel that indeed, even when my mind tells me I am separated from this great love, my body and spirit know always that separation is impossible. I am one with God, as each of you is one with God and with one another.

So I'll end with a story, a sort of parable of my own, and it's about Michelangelo's statue *David*. Michelangelo was not the first man commissioned to do this work. Two men came before him. The first, Agostino di Duccio, inexplicably abandoned the work after shaping some of the legs, feet and torso, and the second artist, Antonio Rossellino, had his contract canceled. Michelangelo came to the work nearly twenty-five years later, a young man barely twenty-six years old. For more than two years, he never left the side of his *David*. He worked and slept near the marble, allowing the subject within to call to him. When the 17-foot statue finally emerged, Michelangelo said, "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free." Asked how he made it, Michelangelo said, "It is easy. You just chip away all of the stone that doesn't look like David."

I saw this unbelievable work of stone a few years ago. I didn't anticipate the reaction I'd have when I first entered the room of the David. I was overcome with awe and stood silent and tearful—filled with such joy that something so beautiful could be created. Maybe it's easy to be breathless with awe in the presence of a 17-foot masterpiece. However, when I open myself to gratitude, to the deep presence of God's love, I am, over and over again, filled to overflowing with this same kind of awe in my daily life. The amazing thing is that, in these moments of pure joy, it's not just the masterpiece that I observe, but that I also become. In those moments, when I set down everything that looks like self-abuse and breathe in gratitude and joy, I return to the state of being that is connection to God and it's like I've chipped away everything that doesn't look like me in my most perfect state. Then *I* set the angel beneath the stone free.

So I ask you all—what are you holding on to right now? As I say those words, ask yourself if there is weight on you—perhaps some old grief, some sadness, a feeling of lack, bitterness, fear; maybe it's a physical or mental condition of stress. These are the heavy layers of stone, I believe, that we build up around our heart that feel an awful lot like we're separated—from ourselves, from each other, and from God. The truth, as I've come to see it, lives in the full and deep exhale of release and forgiveness, where we chip away all of the hard, unnecessary stone encasing the beautifully connected, easeful and expansive space within us.

It began for me when I stepped back into my body and allowed myself to slowly chip away years of self-loathing and abuse. As I've learned to experience that space more, I've found that it comes now in life's sacred pauses—as I notice the masterpieces that come as sunsets, hands tenderly held, forgiveness offered. Connection comes through in the daily sighs of gratitude that spill out into small cups of joy. It's our truest state of being, just waiting to be set free, and it has revealed to me that I am not only worthy of God's love, but that I am deeply connected to that love, with no separation at all.